

Henna

History:

Henna, also called mehndi and mehandi, is an all-natural, reddish brown body stain that looks like a tattoo but isn't. The paste made from the dried, ground leaves of the henna shrub, *Lawsonia Inermis* and a liquid solution that varies from place to place and person to person, has been in use as a cosmetic from ancient times. Some of the earliest records that we have shows its use in Ancient Egypt where it was used to stain the hands, feet nails and to colour and condition the hair. Traces of henna have even been found on the nails of mummified Pharaohs. In the days of the Pharaohs the wearing of henna was a mark of being of the higher classes, if you could take the time needed to apply and care for your skin you obviously lived a life of luxury, over time that changed and every woman be she of high or low birth, country or city born had henna applied to her skin, many at least twice a year for special occasions.

In period Persia and Turkey had some of the most intricate and elegant henna patterning in the Islamic world. Miniatures and pottery pieces from 900 to 1550 AD show elegantly patterned dark henna. Some other cultures that used henna for body adornment are Arabia, Crete, Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Cyprus, Morocco, Spain, Thailand and Sicily.

The use of henna, it is believed; began when the nomadic peoples found that their body temperatures came down when they applied it to their skin. They then tried a simple dot and found that it too had the same effect and from there designs began, some simple and geometric others like those of Persia, flowery and delicate, like fine lace. Each region had their own methods and designs, all different and yet all beautiful. Other areas wanted a darker stain so that would go over the design 3 and 4 times to assure a near black stain. In the Sudan they used a technique called 'dukhan' meaning smoke, in which after the design has been placed on the skin the area is then placed over a smoking fire that has been set in a hole in the ground. When the paste is brushed away the stain appears black.

One question that is often asked is why did the art of henna remain part of the Middle Eastern culture and never make its way to the Western world, like so many other aspects of that world. We are not completely sure, perhaps it has to do with the needs of the seeds to grow properly, or perhaps the dried powder lost its staining ability during the transportation, due to light or moisture. Others think that perhaps Europeans may have been given the leaves but not told what to do with them to create the paste. For some reason this traditional art-form only traveled within the Eastern world.

The Stain, Application and Aftercare:

The dried, crushed henna powder is mixed with a combination of liquids, some used are black tea, coffee, water, lemon or lime juice and assorted essential oils, the paste is then left to cure for several hours before it is ready to apply on the skin. After the design is

complete the paste is left on the skin anywhere from 6 to 24 hours, many times it is wrapped and left on overnight to achieve a deeper stain.

Henna works by staining the outer layer of skin, called the epidermis. The deepest cells of the epidermis are constantly creating new cells and as these new cells rise to the surface the old cells die and are discarded, thus causing the design to gradually fade away. Some areas of the body generate faster than others so designs done in those areas will fade faster than others. The face and neck regenerate quickly, usually within a week; while the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet can take up to four weeks to regenerate completely. The stain is also affected by body temperature, pore size and body chemistry, so the same area may stain differently on different people. The designs start off light at first and then gradually darken over the next 24 to 48 hours.

Recipes vary but here is a basic one to try if you decide to make your own paste. Make a brew of boiled tea or coffee, you can use instant if you don't have any fresh coffee, to this I usually add lemon juice and some powdered clove and on occasions some orange zest. While this is slowly simmering add a few tablespoons of the dried powder (make sure it is a vibrant green colour) to a bowl. Strain the liquid solution very well and then add it to the powder slowly, you want it to be the consistency of mud or toothpaste. You can also add eucalyptus, mustard seed or lavender oil to the mix, this helps mask the scent which some people find offensive. When your mixture looks about right let it sit to cool and mature for about an hour. Save any left over catalyst. If a lot of water evaporates during the cooling time you can add more liquid to the paste to achieve the consistency that you are looking for.

Another even easier recipe is to use just lemon juice and a "terped" oil. Mix your powder with the lemon juice until it is the consistency of toothpaste in a ceramic bowl and leave it to set. After 24 hours scrape a plastic spoon across the top of the paste, if the top is a brownish colour and the exposed paste from underneath is a deep green the paste is ready. Add a little Eucalyptus, lavender or cajeput oil to the paste, put it into your Jac bottle or cone and you are ready to go.

In period the paste was applied to the skin by means of a thin stick or sliver of bone, first it would be dipped in the paste and then dotted on the skin in the desired pattern. In the current Middle Ages you may yet find individuals applying mehndi this way but most of the time artists use carrot bags, cellophane cones or "jac" bottles and metal tips. Each person has their personal favourite.

When it is time to remove the dried paste from your skin, do not use water. Instead, flake the paste off with your fingernail, credit card or license and then use a cotton ball or tissue dipped in oil, I like a light olive oil, to remove any traces of paste. Keep the design as dry as possible for the first 12 hours or so to allow the stain a chance to develop. Avoid scrubbing the design as it will cause it to fade faster. You can also exfoliate before you have your design and then moisturize after to help prolong the design.

Cost:

Start up is not overly expensive and for the beginner who is uncomfortable with mixing their own paste there are many excellent kits on the market. Earth Henna, from Lakaye Studios; offers several different kits, books and accessories for all levels. The price for a large complete kit that includes powder, catalyst, bottle with tip, cotton balls, oil, tooth picks and stencils averages around \$20.

If you want to try your hand at mixing your own fresh henna can be easily obtained from www.castleart.com or through www.thehennapage.com There are many different types of henna some that will give a deeper stain while others are stringier and make lines as fine as spider webbing, its all up to your preference.

Cellophane triangles are easily made from heavy holographic cellophane wrapping paper and tape. Although many people purchase plastic decorator bags and simply use a cake decorating coupler and a 00 or 01 decorating tip. The bags are usually \$5 for 100 or so bags and the tips and couples are under a dollar each.

Compiled by
Mihrimah Mahidevran khatun
Mka Shae Conlin

Bibliography:

The Art of Mehndi, Sumita Batra, **ISBN:** 014028401X. Lots of great pictures and designs. Sections on technique and mixing your own paste. She also shows use of kumkum paste and bindis as ways of making the henna design more interesting.

Mehndi: The Art of Henna Body Painting, Carine Fabius, **ISBN:** 0609803190. This book was written by the founder of Lakaye Studio. Great pictures and is an excellent book to start with.

The Henna Body Art Kit: Everything You Need to Create Stunning Temporary Tattoos, Aileen Marron, **ISBN:** 1885203640. The book comes with powder and catalyst to mix along with several wonderful stencils. The book discusses the history of henna, different techniques, how to personalize a stencil, and how to tell if the powder is fresh or not. Excellent book..the stencils and directions for the intricate peacock bridal hands is just fabulous!

WWW.thehennapage.com This site has so much information! There are areas on history, application, mixing, medical restrictions, books that you can purchase and download, links to vendors, and so much more. Catherine Cartwright-Jones is affiliated with the site and is very well known in the henna community. They also have an “almost free” section where you can get samples of henna powder, oils, cones and all you pay is the shipping charges!